Toni Morrison, The Art of Fiction No. 134

Interviewed by Elissa Schappell, with additional material from Claudia Brodsky Lacour

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Toni Morrison detests being called a "poetic writer." She seems to think that the attention that has been paid to the lyricism of her work marginalizes her talent and denies her stories their power and resonance. As one of the few novelists whose work is both popular and critically acclaimed, she can afford the luxury of choosing what praise to accept. But she does not reject all classifications, and, in fact, embraces the title "black woman writer." Her ability to transform individuals into forces and idiosyncrasies into inevitabilities has led some critics to call her the "D. H. Lawrence of the black psyche." She is also a master of the public novel, examining the relationships between the races and sexes and the struggle between civilization and nature, while at the same time combining myth and the fantastic with a deep political sensitivity.

We talked with Morrison one summer Sunday afternoon on the lush campus of Princeton University. The interview took place in her office, which is decorated with a large Helen Frankenthaler print, pen-and-ink drawings an architect did of all the houses that appear in her work, photographs, a few framed book-jacket covers, and an apology note to her from Hemingway—a forgery meant as a joke. On her desk is a blue glass teacup emblazoned with the likeness of Shirley Temple filled with the number two pencils that she uses to write her first drafts. Jade plants sit in a window and a few more potted plants hang above. A coffeemaker and cups are at the ready. Despite the high ceilings, the big desk, and the high-backed black rocking chairs, the room had the warm feeling of a kitchen, maybe because talking to Morrison about writing is the intimate kind of conversation that often seems to happen in kitchens; or perhaps it was the fact that as our energy started flagging she magically produced mugs of cranberry juice. We felt that she had allowed us to enter into a sanctuary, and that, however subtly, she was completely in control of the situation.

Outside, high canopies of oak leaves filtered the sunlight, dappling her white office with pools of yellowy light. Morrison sat behind her big desk, which despite her apologies for the "disorder" appeared well organized. Stacks of books and piles of paper resided on a painted bench set against the wall. She is smaller than one might imagine, and her hair, gray and silver, is woven into thin steel-colored braids that hang just at shoulder length. Occasionally during the interview Morrison let her sonorous, deep voice break into rumbling laughter and punctuated certain statements with a flat smack of her hand on the desktop. At a moment's notice she can switch from raging about violence in the United States to gleefully skewering the hosts of the trash TV talk shows through which she confesses to channel surfing sometimes late in the afternoon if her work is done.

INTERVIEWER

You have said that you begin to write before dawn. Did this habit begin for practical reasons, or was the early morning an especially fruitful time for you?

TONI MORRISON

Writing before dawn began as a necessity—I had small children when I first began to write and I needed to use the time before they said, Mama—and that was always around five in the morning. Many years later, after I stopped working at Random House, I just stayed at home for a couple of years. I discovered things about myself I had never thought about before. At first I didn't know

when I wanted to eat, because I had always eaten when it was lunchtime or dinnertime or breakfast time. Work and the children had driven all of my habits . . . I didn't know the weekday sounds of my own house; it all made me feel a little giddy.

I was involved in writing *Beloved* at that time—this was in 1983—and eventually I realized that I was clearer-headed, more confident and generally more intelligent in the morning. The habit of getting up early, which I had formed when the children were young, now became my choice. I am not very bright or very witty or very inventive after the sun goes down.

Recently I was talking to a writer who described something she did whenever she moved to her writing table. I don't remember exactly what the gesture was—there is something on her desk that she touches before she hits the computer keyboard—but we began to talk about little rituals that one goes through before beginning to write. I, at first, thought I didn't have a ritual, but then I remembered that I always get up and make a cup of coffee while it is still dark—it must be dark—and then I drink the coffee and watch the light come. And she said, Well, that's a ritual. And I realized that for me this ritual comprises my preparation to enter a space that I can only call nonsecular . . . Writers all devise ways to approach that place where they expect to make the contact, where they become the conduit, or where they engage in this mysterious process. For me, light is the signal in the transition. It's not being *in* the light, it's being there *before it arrives*. It enables me, in some sense.

I tell my students one of the most important things they need to know is when they are their best, creatively. They need to ask themselves, What does the ideal room look like? Is there music? Is there silence? Is there chaos outside or is there serenity outside? What do I need in order to release my imagination?

INTERVIEWER

What about your writing routine?

MORRISON

I have an ideal writing routine that I've never experienced, which is to have, say, nine uninterrupted days when I wouldn't have to leave the house or take phone calls. And to have the space—a space where I have huge tables. I end up with this much space [*she indicates a small square spot on her desk*] everywhere I am, and I can't beat my way out of it. I am reminded of that tiny desk that Emily Dickinson wrote on and I chuckle when I think, Sweet thing, there she was. But that is all any of us have: just this small space and no matter what the filing system or how often you clear it out—life, documents, letters, requests, invitations, invoices just keep going back in. I am not able to write regularly. I have never been able to do that—mostly because I have always had a nine-to-five job. I had to write either in between those hours, hurriedly, or spend a lot of weekend and predawn time.

INTERVIEWER

Could you write after work?

MORRISON

That was difficult. I've tried to overcome not having orderly spaces by substituting compulsion for discipline, so that when something is urgently there, urgently seen or understood, or the metaphor was powerful enough, then I would move everything aside and write for sustained periods of time. I'm talking to you about getting the first draft.

INTERVIEWER

You have to do it straight through?

MORRISON

I do. I don't think it's a law.

INTERVIEWER

Could you write on the bottom of a shoe while riding on a train like Robert Frost? Could you write on an airplane?

MORRISON

Sometimes something that I was having some trouble with falls into place, a word sequence, say, so I've written on scraps of paper, in hotels on hotel stationery, in automobiles. *If* it arrives you *know*. If you know it *really* has come, then you *have* to put it down.

INTERVIEWER

What is the physical act of writing like for you?

MORRISON

I write with a pencil.

INTERVIEWER

Would you ever work on a word processor?

MORRISON

Oh, I do that also, but that is much later when everything is put together. I type that into a computer and then I begin to revise. But everything I write for the first time is written with a pencil, maybe a ballpoint if I don't have a pencil. I'm not picky, but my preference is for yellow legal pads and a nice number two pencil.

INTERVIEWER

Dixon Ticonderoga number two soft?

MORRISON

Exactly. I remember once trying to use a tape recorder, but it doesn't work.

INTERVIEWER

Did you actually dictate a story into the machine?

MORRISON

Not the whole thing, but just a bit. For instance, when two or three sentences seemed to fall into place, I thought I would carry a tape recorder in the car, particularly when I was working at Random House going back and forth every day. It occurred to me that I could just record it. It was a disaster. I don't trust my writing that is not written, although I work very hard in subsequent revisions to remove the writerly-ness from it, to give it a combination of lyrical, standard, and colloquial language. To pull all these things together into something that I think is much more alive and representative. But I don't trust something that occurs to me and then is spoken and transferred immediately to the page.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever read your work out loud while you are working on it?

MORRISON

Not until it's published. I don't trust a performance. I could get a response that might make me think it was successful when it wasn't at all. The difficulty for me in writing—*among* the difficulties—is to write language that can work quietly on a page for a reader who doesn't hear anything. Now for that, one has to work very carefully with what is *in between* the words. What is not said. Which is measure, which is rhythm, and so on. So, it is what you don't write that frequently gives what you do write its power.

INTERVIEWER

How many times would you say you have to write a paragraph over to reach this standard?

MORRISON

Well, those that need reworking I do as long as I can. I mean I've revised six times, seven times, thirteen times. But there's a line between revision and fretting, just working it to death. It is important to know when you are fretting it; when you are fretting it because it is not working, it needs to be scrapped.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever go back over what has been published and wish you had fretted more over something?

MORRISON

A lot. Everything.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever rework passages that have already been published before reading them to an audience?

MORRISON

I don't change it for the audience, but I know what it ought to be and isn't. After twenty-some years you can figure it out; I know more about it now than I did then. It is not so much that it would have been different or even better; it is just that, taken into context with what I was trying to effect, or what consequence I wanted it to have on the reader, years later the picture is clearer to me.

INTERVIEWER

How do you think being an editor for twenty years affected you as a writer?

MORRISON

I am not sure. It lessened my awe of the publishing industry. I understood the adversarial relationship that sometimes exists between writers and publishers, but I learned how important, how critical an editor was, which I don't think I would have known before.

INTERVIEWER

Are there editors who are helpful critically?

MORRISON

Oh yes. The good ones make all the difference. It is like a priest or a psychiatrist; if you get the wrong one, then you are better off alone. But there are editors so rare and so important that they are worth searching for, and you always know when you have one.

INTERVIEWER

Who was the most instrumental editor you've ever worked with?

MORRISON

I had a very good editor, superlative for me—Bob Gottlieb. What made him good for me was a number of things—knowing what not to touch; asking all the questions you probably would have asked yourself had there been the time. Good editors are really the third eye. Cool. Dispassionate. They don't love you or your work; for me that is what is valuable—not compliments. Sometimes it's uncanny; the editor puts his or her finger on exactly the place the writer knows is weak but just couldn't do any better at the time. Or perhaps the writer thought it might fly, but wasn't sure. Good editors identify that place and sometimes make suggestions. Some suggestions are not useful because you can't explain everything to an editor about what you are trying to do. I couldn't possibly explain all of those things to an editor, because what I do has to work on so many levels. But within the relationship if there is some trust, some willingness to listen, remarkable things can happen. I read books all the time that I know would have profited from not a copy editor but somebody just talking through it. And it is important to get a great editor at a certain time, because if you don't have one in the beginning, you almost can't have one later. If you work well without an editor, and your books are well received for five or ten years, and then you write another one—which is successful but not very good—why should you then listen to an editor?

INTERVIEWER

You have told students that they should think of the process of revision as one of the major satisfactions of writing. Do you get more pleasure out of writing the first draft, or in the actual revision of the work?

MORRISON

They are different. I am profoundly excited by thinking up or having the idea in the first place . . . before I begin to write.

INTERVIEWER

Does it come in a flash?

MORRISON

No, it's a sustained thing I have to play with. I always start out with an idea, even a boring idea, that becomes a question I don't have any answers to. Specifically, since I began the *Beloved* trilogy, the last part of which I'm working on now, I have been wondering why women who are twenty, thirty years younger than I am are no happier than women who are my age and older. What on earth is that about, when there are so many more things that they can do, so many more choices? *All right*, so this is an embarrassment of riches, but so what. Why is everybody so miserable?

INTERVIEWER

Do you write to figure out exactly how you feel about a subject?

MORRISON

No, I know how I *feel*. My feelings are the result of prejudices and convictions like everybody else's. But I am interested in the complexity, the vulnerability of an idea. It is not "this is what I believe," because that would not be a book, just a tract. A book is "this may be what I believe, but suppose I am wrong . . . what could it be?" Or, "I don't know what it is, but I am interested in finding out what it might mean to me, as well as to other people."

INTERVIEWER

Did you know as a child you wanted to be a writer?

MORRISON

No. I wanted to be a reader. I thought everything that needed to be written had already been written or would be. I only wrote the first book because I thought it wasn't there, and I wanted to read it when I got through. I am a pretty good reader. I love it. It is what I do, really. So, if I can read it, that is the highest compliment I can think of. People say, I write for myself, and it sounds so awful and so narcissistic, but in a sense if you know how to read your own work— that is, with the necessary critical distance—it makes you a better writer and editor. When I teach creative writing, I always speak about how you have to learn how to read your work; I don't mean enjoy it because you wrote it. I mean, go away from it, and read it as though it is the first time you've ever seen it. Critique it that way. Don't get all involved in your thrilling sentences and all that . . .

INTERVIEWER

Do you have your audience in mind when you sit down to write?

MORRISON

Only me. If I come to a place where I am unsure, I have the characters to go to for reassurance. By that time they are friendly enough to tell me if the rendition of their lives is authentic or not. But there are so many things only I can tell. After all, this is my work. I have to take full responsibility for doing it right as well as doing it wrong. Doing it wrong isn't bad, but doing it wrong and thinking you've done it right is. I remember spending a whole summer writing something I was very impressed with, but couldn't get back to until winter. I went back confident that those fifty pages were really first-rate, but when I read them each page of the fifty was terrible. It was really ill-conceived. I knew that I could do it over, but I just couldn't get over the fact that I thought it was so good at the time. And that is scary because then you think it means you don't know.

INTERVIEWER

What about it was so bad?

MORRISON

It was pompous. Pompous and unappetizing.

INTERVIEWER

I read that you started writing after your divorce as a way of beating back the loneliness. Was that true, and do you write for different reasons now?

MORRISON

Sort of. Sounds simpler than it was. I don't know if I was writing for that reason or some other reason—or one that I don't even suspect. I do know that I don't like it here if I don't have something to write.

INTERVIEWER

Here, meaning where?

MORRISON

Meaning out in the world. It is not possible for me to be unaware of the incredible violence, the willful ignorance, the hunger for other people's pain. I'm always conscious of that though I am less aware of it under certain circumstances—good friends at dinner, other books. Teaching makes a big difference, but that is not enough. Teaching could make me into someone who is complacent, unaware, rather than part of the solution. So what makes me feel as though I belong here out in this world is not the teacher, not the mother, not the lover, but what goes on in my mind when I am writing. Then I belong here and then all of the things that are disparate and irreconcilable can be useful. I can do the traditional things that writers always say they do, which is to make order out of chaos. Even if you are reproducing the disorder, you are sovereign at that point. Struggling through the work is extremely important—more important to me than publishing it.

INTERVIEWER

If you didn't do this. Then the chaos would—

MORRISON

Then I would be part of the chaos.

INTERVIEWER

Wouldn't the answer to that be either to lecture about the chaos or to be in politics?

MORRISON

If I had a gift for it. All I can do is read books and write books and edit books and critique books. I don't think that I could show up on a regular basis as a politician. I would lose interest. I don't have the resources for it, the gift. There are people who can organize other people and I cannot. I'd just get bored.

INTERVIEWER

When did it become clear to you that your gift was to be a writer?

MORRISON

It was very late. I always thought I was probably adept, because people used to say so, but their criteria might not have been mine. So, I wasn't interested in what they said. It meant nothing. It was by the time I was writing *Song of Solomon*, the third book, that I began to think that this was the central part of my life. Not to say that other women haven't said it all along, but for a woman to say, I am a writer, is difficult.

INTERVIEWER

Why?

MORRISON

Well, it isn't so difficult *anymore*, but it certainly was for me and for women of my generation or my class or my race. I don't know that all those things are folded into it, but the point is you're moving yourself out of the gender role. You are not saying, I am a mother, I am a wife. Or if you're in the labor market, I am a teacher, I am an editor. But when you move to *writer*, what is that supposed to mean? Is that a job? Is this the way you make your living? It's an intervention into terrain that you are not familiar with—where you have no provenance. At the time I certainly didn't personally know any other women writers who were successful; it looked very much like a male preserve. So you sort of hope you're going to be a little minor person around the edges. It's almost as if you needed permission to write. When I read women's biographies and autobiographies, even accounts of how they got started writing, almost every one of them had a little anecdote that told about the moment someone gave them permission to do it. A mother, a husband, a teacher—somebody—said, OK, go ahead—you can do it. Which is not to say that men have never needed that; frequently when they are very young, a mentor says, You're good, and they take off. The entitlement was something they could take for granted. I couldn't. It was all very strange. So, even though I knew that writing was central to my life, that it was where my mind was, where I was most delighted and most challenged, I couldn't say it. If someone asked me, What do you do? I wouldn't say, Oh I'm a writer. I'd say, I'm an editor, or, A teacher. Because when you meet people and go to lunch, if they say, What do you do? and you say, I'm a writer, they have to think about that, and then they ask, What have you written? Then they have to either like it or not like it. People feel obliged to like or not like and say so. It is perfectly all right to hate my work. It really is. I have close friends whose work I loathe.

INTERVIEWER

Did you feel you had to write in private?

MORRISON

Oh yes, I wanted to make it a private thing. I wanted to own it myself. Because once you say it, then other people become involved. As a matter of fact, while I was at Random House I never said I was a writer.

INTERVIEWER

Why not?

MORRISON

Oh, it would have been awful. First of all they didn't hire me to do that. They didn't hire me to be one of *them*. Secondly, I think they would have fired me.

INTERVIEWER

Really?

MORRISON

Sure. There were no in-house editors who wrote fiction. Ed Doctorow quit. There was nobody else—no real buying, negotiating editor in trade who was also publishing her own novels.

INTERVIEWER

Did the fact that you were a woman have anything to do with it?

MORRISON

That I didn't think about too much. I was so busy. I only know that I will never again trust my life, my future, to the whims of men, in companies or out. Never again will their judgment have anything to do with what I think I can do. That was the wonderful liberation of being divorced and having children. I did not mind failure, ever, but I minded thinking that someone male knew better. Before that, all the men I knew *did* know better, they really did. My father and teachers were smart people who knew better. Then I came across a smart person who was very important to me who *didn't* know better.

INTERVIEWER

Was this your husband?

MORRISON

Yes. He knew better about his life, but not about mine. I had to stop and say, Let me start again and see what it is like to be a grown-up. I decided to leave home, to take my children with me, to go into publishing and see what I could do. I was prepared for that not to work either, but I wanted to see what it was like to be a grown-up.

INTERVIEWER

Can you talk about that moment at Random House when they suddenly realized that they had a writer in their midst?

MORRISON

I published a book called *The Bluest Eye*. I didn't tell them about it. They didn't know until they read the review in *The New York Times*. It was published by Holt. Somebody had told this young guy there that I was writing something and he had said in a very offhand way, If you ever complete something send it to me. So I did. A lot of black men were writing in 1968, 1969, and he bought it, thinking that there was a growing interest in what black people were writing and that this book of mine would also sell. He was wrong. What was selling was: Let me tell you how powerful I am and how horrible you are, or some version of that. For whatever reasons, he took a small risk. He didn't pay me much, so it didn't matter if the book sold or not. It got a really horrible review in *The New York Times Book Review* on Sunday and then got a very good daily review.

INTERVIEWER

You mentioned getting permission to write. Who gave it to you?

MORRISON

No one. What I needed permission to do was to succeed at it. I never signed a contract until the book was finished because I didn't want it to be homework. A contract meant somebody was waiting for it, that I *had* to do it, and they could ask me about it. They could get up in my face and I don't like that. By not signing a contract, I do it, and if I want you to see it, I'll let you see it. It has to do with self-esteem. I am sure for years you have heard writers constructing illusions of freedom, anything in order to have the illusion that it is all mine and only I can do it. I

remember introducing Eudora Welty and saying that nobody could have written those stories but her, meaning that I have a feeling about most books that at some point somebody would have written them *anyway*. But then there are some writers without whom certain stories would never have been written. I don't mean the subject matter or the narrative but just the way in which they did it—their slant on it is truly unique.

INTERVIEWER

Who are some of them?

MORRISON

Hemingway is in that category, Flannery O'Connor. Faulkner, Fitzgerald . . .

INTERVIEWER

Haven't you been critical of the way these authors depicted blacks?

MORRISON

No! Me, critical? I have been revealing how white writers imagine black people, and some of them are brilliant at it. Faulkner was brilliant at it. Hemingway did it poorly in places and brilliantly elsewhere.

INTERVIEWER

How so?

MORRISON

In not using black characters, but using the aesthetic of blacks as anarchy, as sexual license, as deviance. In his last book, *The Garden of Eden*, Hemingway's heroine is getting blacker and blacker. The woman who is going mad tells her husband, I want to be your little African queen. The novel gets its charge that way: Her white white hair and her black, black skin . . . almost like a Man Ray photograph. Mark Twain talked about racial ideology in the most powerful, eloquent, and instructive way I have ever read. Edgar Allan Poe did not. He loved white supremacy and the planter class, and he wanted to be a gentleman, and he endorsed all of that. He didn't contest it or critique it. What is exciting about American literature is that business of how writers say things under, beneath, and around their stories. Think of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and all these inversions of what race is, how sometimes nobody can tell, or the thrill of discovery? Faulkner in *Absalom, Absalom!* spends the entire book tracing race and you can't find it. No one can see it, even the character who *is* black can't see it. I did this lecture for my students that took me forever, which was tracking all the moments of withheld, partial, or disinformation, when a racial fact or clue *sort* of comes out but doesn't quite arrive. I just wanted to chart it. I listed its appearance, disguise, and disappearance on every page—I mean every phrase! Everything, and I delivered this thing to my class. They all fell asleep! But I was so fascinated, technically. Do you know how hard it is to withhold that kind of information but hinting, pointing all of the time? And then to reveal it in order to say that it is *not* the point anyway? It is technically just astonishing. As a reader you have been forced to hunt for a drop of black blood that means everything and nothing. The insanity of racism. So the structure is the argument. Not what this one says or that one says . . . it is the *structure* of the book, and you are there hunting this black thing that is nowhere to be found and yet makes all the difference. No one has done anything quite like that ever. So,

when I critique, what I am saying is, I don't care if Faulkner is a racist or not; I don't personally care but I am fascinated by what it means to write like this.

INTERVIEWER

What about black writers . . . how do they write in a world dominated by and informed by their relationship to a white culture?

MORRISON

By trying to alter language, simply to free it up, not to repress it or confine it, but to open it up. Tease it. Blast its racist straitjacket. I wrote a story entitled "Recitatif," in which there are two little girls in an orphanage, one white and one black. But the reader doesn't know which is white and which is black. I use class codes, but no racial codes.

INTERVIEWER

Is this meant to confuse the reader?

MORRISON

Well, yes. But to provoke and enlighten. I did that as a lark. What was exciting was to be forced as a writer not to be lazy and rely on obvious codes. Soon as I say, Black woman . . . I can rest on or provoke predictable responses, but if I leave it out then I have to talk about her in a complicated way—as a person.

INTERVIEWER

Why wouldn't you want to say, The black woman came out of the store?

MORRISON

Well, you can, but it has to be important that she is black.

INTERVIEWER

What about *The Confessions of Nat Turner*?

MORRISON

Well, here we have a very self-conscious character who says things like, I looked at my black hand. Or, I woke up and I felt black. It is very much on Bill Styron's mind. He feels charged in Nat Turner's skin . . . in this place that feels exotic to him. So it reads exotically to us, that's all.

INTERVIEWER

There was a tremendous outcry at that time from people who felt that Styron didn't have a right to write about Nat Turner.

MORRISON

He has a right to write about whatever he wants. To suggest otherwise is outrageous. What they should have criticized, and some of them did, was Styron's suggestion that Nat Turner hated black people. In the book Turner expresses his revulsion over and over again . . . he's so distant from blacks, so superior. So the fundamental question is why would anybody follow him? What kind of leader is this who has a fundamentally racist contempt that seems unreal to any black person reading it? Any white leader would have some interest and identification with the people

he was asking to die. That was what these critics meant when they said Nat Turner speaks like a white man. That racial distance is strong and clear in that book.

INTERVIEWER

You must have read a lot of slave narratives for *Beloved*.

MORRISON

I wouldn't read them for information because I knew that they had to be authenticated by white patrons, that they couldn't say everything they wanted to say because they couldn't alienate their audience; they had to be quiet about certain things. They were going to be as good as they could be under the circumstances and as revelatory, but they never say how terrible it was. They would just say, Well, you know, it was really awful, but let's abolish slavery so life can go on. Their narratives had to be very understated. So while I looked at the documents and felt *familiar* with slavery and overwhelmed by it, I wanted it to be truly *felt*. I wanted to translate the historical into the personal. I spent a long time trying to figure out what it was about slavery that made it so repugnant, so personal, so indifferent, so intimate, and yet so public.

In reading some of the documents I noticed frequent references to something that was never properly described—*the bit*. This thing was put into the mouth of slaves to punish them and shut them up without preventing them from working. I spent a long time trying to find out what it looked like. I kept reading statements like, I put the bit on Jenny, or, as Equiano says, "I went into a kitchen" and I saw a woman standing at the stove, and she had a brake (*b-r-a-k-e*, he spells it) "in her mouth," and I said, What is that? and somebody told me what it was, and then I said, I never saw anything so awful in all my life. But I really couldn't image the thing—did it look like a horse's bit or what?

Eventually I did find some sketches in one book in this country, which was the record of a man's torture of his wife. In South America, Brazil, places like that, they kept such mementos. But while I was searching, something else occurred to me—namely, that this bit, this item, this personalized type of torture, was a direct descendant of the inquisition. And I realized that of course you can't buy this stuff. You can't send away for a mail-order bit for your slave. Sears doesn't carry them. So you have to make it. You have to go out in the backyard and put some stuff together and construct it and then affix it to a person. So the whole process had a very personal quality for the person who made it, as well as for the person who wore it. Then I realized that describing it would never be helpful; that the reader didn't need to *see* it so much as *feel* what it was like. I realized that it was important to imagine the bit as an active instrument, rather than simply as a curio or an historical fact. And in the same way I wanted to show the reader what slavery *felt* like, rather than how it looked.

There's a passage in which Paul D. says to Sethe, "I've never told anybody about it, I've sung about it sometimes." He tries to tell her what wearing the bit was like, but he ends up talking about a rooster that he swears smiled at him when he wore it—he felt cheapened and lessened and that he would never be worth as much as a rooster sitting on a tub in the sunlight. I make other references to the desire to spit, to sucking iron, and so on; but it seemed to me that describing what it *looked* like would distract the reader from what I wanted him or her to experience, which was what it *felt* like. The kind of information you can find between the lines of history. It sort of falls off the page, or it's a glance and a reference. It's right there in the intersection where an institution becomes personal, where the historical becomes people with names.

INTERVIEWER

When you create a character is it completely created out of your own imagination?

MORRISON

I never use anyone I know. In *The Bluest Eye* I think I used some gestures and dialogue of my mother in certain places, and a little geography. I've never done that since. I really am very conscientious about that. It's never based on anyone. I don't do what many writers do.

INTERVIEWER

Why is that?

MORRISON

There is this feeling that artists have—photographers, more than other people, and writers—that they are acting like a succubus . . . this process of taking from something that's alive and using it for one's own purposes. You can do it with trees, butterflies, or human beings. Making a little life for oneself by scavenging other people's lives is a big question, and it does have moral and ethical implications.

In fiction, I feel the most intelligent, and the most free, and the most excited, when my characters are fully invented people. That's part of the excitement. If they're based on somebody else, in a funny way it's an infringement of a copyright. That person *owns* his life, has a patent on it. It shouldn't be available for fiction.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever feel like your characters are getting away from you, out of your control?

MORRISON

I take control of them. They are very carefully imagined. I feel as though I know all there is to know about them, even things I don't write—like how they part their hair. They are like ghosts. They have nothing on their minds but themselves and aren't interested in anything but themselves. So you can't let them write your book for you. I have read books in which I know that has happened—when a novelist has been totally taken over by a character. I want to say, You can't do that. If those people could write books they would, but they can't. *You* can. So, you have to say, Shut up. Leave me alone. I am doing this.

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever had to tell any of your characters to shut up?

MORRISON

Pilate, I did. Therefore she doesn't speak very much. She has this long conversation with the two boys and every now and then she'll say something, but she doesn't have the dialogue the other people have. I had to do that, otherwise she was going to overwhelm everybody. She got terribly interesting; characters can do that for a little bit. I had to take it back. It's *my* book; it's not called "Pilate."

INTERVIEWER

Pilate is such a strong character. It seems to me that the women in your books are almost always stronger and braver than the men. Why is that?

MORRISON

That isn't true, but I hear that a lot. I think that our expectations of women are very low. If women just stand up straight for thirty days, everybody goes, Oh! How brave! As a matter of fact, somebody wrote about Sethe, and said she was this powerful, statuesque woman who wasn't even human. But at the end of the book, she can barely turn her head. She has been zonked; she can't even feed herself. Is that tough?

INTERVIEWER

Maybe people read it that way because they thought Sethe made such a hard choice slashing Beloved's throat. Maybe they think that's being strong. Some would say that's just bad manners.

MORRISON

Well, Beloved surely didn't think it was all that tough. She thought it was lunacy. Or, more importantly, How do you know death is better for me? You've never died. How could you know? But I think Paul D., Son, Stamp Paid, even Guitar, make equally difficult choices; they are principled. I do think we are too accustomed to women who don't talk back or who use the weapons of the weak.

INTERVIEWER

What are the weapons of the weak?

MORRISON

Nagging. Poison. Gossip. Sneaking around instead of confrontation.

INTERVIEWER

There have been so few novels about women who have intense friendships with other women. Why do you think that is?

MORRISON

It has been a discredited relationship. When I was writing *Sula*, I was under the impression that for a large part of the female population a woman friend was considered a secondary relationship. A man and a woman's relationship was primary. Women, your own friends, were always secondary relationships when the man was not there. Because of this, there's that whole cadre of women who don't like women and prefer men. We had to be taught to like one another. *Ms.* magazine was founded on the premise that we really have to stop complaining about one another, hating, fighting one another and joining men in their condemnation of ourselves—a typical example of what dominated people do. That is a big education. When much of the literature was like that—when you read about women together (not lesbians or those who have formed long relationships that are covertly lesbian, like in Virginia Woolf's work), it is an overtly male view of females together. They are usually male-dominated—like some of Henry James's characters—or the women are talking about men, like Jane Austen's girlfriends . . . talking about who got married, and how to get married, and are you going to lose him, and I think she wants him and so on. To have heterosexual women who are friends, who are talking only about themselves to each other, seemed to me a very radical thing when *Sula* was published in 1971 . . . but it is hardly radical now.

INTERVIEWER

It is becoming acceptable.

MORRISON

Yes, and it's going to get boring. It will be overdone and as usual it will all run amok.

INTERVIEWER

Why do writers have such a hard time writing about sex?

MORRISON

Sex is difficult to write about because it's just not sexy enough. The only way to write about it is not to write much. Let the reader bring his own sexuality into the text. A writer I usually admire has written about sex in the most off-putting way. There is just too much information. If you start saying "the curve of . . ." you soon sound like a gynecologist. Only Joyce could get away with that. He said all those forbidden words. He said *cunt*, and that was shocking. The forbidden word can be provocative. But after a while it becomes monotonous rather than arousing. Less is always better. Some writers think that if they use dirty words they've done it. It can work for a short period and for a very young imagination, but after a while it doesn't deliver. When Sethe and Paul D. first see each other, in about half a page they get the sex out of the way, which isn't any good anyway—it's fast and they're embarrassed about it—and then they're lying there trying to pretend they're not in that bed, that they haven't met, and then they begin to think different thoughts, which begin to merge so you can't tell who's thinking what. That merging to me is more tactically sensual than if I had tried to describe body parts.

INTERVIEWER

What about plot? Do you always know where you're going? Would you write the end before you got there?

MORRISON

When I really know what it is about, then I can write that end scene. I wrote the end of *Beloved*about a quarter of the way in. I wrote the end of *Jazz* very early and the end of *Song of Solomon* very early on. What I really want is for the plot to be *how* it happened. It is like a detective story in a sense. You know who is dead and you want to find out who did it. So, you put the salient elements up front and the reader is hooked into wanting to know how did that happen. Who did that and why? You are forced into having a certain kind of language that will keep the reader asking those questions. In *Jazz*, just as I did before with *The Bluest Eye*, I put the whole plot on the first page. In fact, in the first edition the plot was on the cover, so that a person in a bookstore could read the cover and know right away what the book was about, and could, if they wished, dismiss it and buy another book. This seemed a suitable technique for *Jazz* because I thought of the plot in that novel, the threesome, as the melody of the piece, and it is fine to follow a melody—to feel the satisfaction of recognizing a melody whenever the narrator returns to it. That was the real art of the enterprise for me—bumping up against that melody time and again, seeing it from another point of view, seeing it afresh each time, playing it back and forth.

When Keith Jarret plays "Ol' Man River," the delight and satisfaction is not so much in the melody itself but in recognizing it when it surfaces and when it is hidden, and when it goes away completely, what is put in its place. Not so much in the original line as in all the echoes and shades and turns and pivots Jarret plays around it. I was trying to do something similar with the plot in *Jazz*. I wanted the story to be the vehicle that moved us from page one to the end, but I

wanted the delight to be found in moving away from the story and coming back to it, looking around it, and through it, as though it was a prism, constantly turning.

This playful aspect of *Jazz* may well cause a great deal of dissatisfaction in readers who just want the melody, who want to know what happened, who did it and why. But the jazzlike structure wasn't a secondary thing for me—it was the raison d'être of the book. The process of trial and error by which the narrator revealed the plot was as important and exciting to me as telling the story.

INTERVIEWER

You also divulge the plot early on in *Beloved*.

MORRISON

It seemed important to me that the action in *Beloved*—the fact of infanticide—be immediately known, but deferred, unseen. I wanted to give the reader all the information and the consequences surrounding the act, while avoiding engorging myself or the reader with the violence itself. I remember writing the sentence where Sethe cuts the throat of the child very, very late in the process of writing the book. I remember getting up from the table and walking outside for a long time—walking around the yard and coming back and revising it a little bit and going back out and in and rewriting the sentence over and over again . . . Each time I fixed that sentence so that it was exactly right, or so I thought, but then I would be unable to sit there and would have to go away and come back. I thought that the act itself had to be not only buried but also understated, because if the language was going to compete with the violence itself it would be obscene or pornographic.

INTERVIEWER

Style is obviously very important to you. Can you talk about this in relation to *Jazz*?

MORRISON

With *Jazz*, I wanted to convey the sense that a musician conveys—that he has more but he's not gonna give it to you. It's an exercise in restraint, a holding back—not because it's not there, or because one had exhausted it, but because of the riches, and because it can be done again. That sense of knowing when to stop is a learned thing and I didn't always have it. It was probably not until after I wrote *Song of Solomon* that I got to feeling secure enough to experience what it meant to be thrifty with images and language and so on. I was very conscious in writing *Jazz* of trying to blend that which is contrived and artificial with improvisation. I thought of myself as like the jazz musician—someone who practices and practices and practices in order to be able to invent and to make his art look effortless and graceful. I was always conscious of the constructed aspect of the writing process, and that art appears natural and elegant only as a result of constant practice and awareness of its formal structures. You must practice thrift in order to achieve that luxurious quality of wastefulness—that sense that you have enough to waste, that you are holding back—without actually wasting anything. You shouldn't overgratify, you should never satiate. I've always felt that that peculiar sense of hunger at the end of a piece of art—a yearning for more—is really very, very powerful. But there is at the same time a kind of contentment, knowing that at some other time there will indeed be more because the artist is endlessly inventive.

INTERVIEWER

Were there other . . . ingredients, structural entities?

MORRISON

Well, it seems to me that migration was a major event in the cultural history of this country. Now, I'm being very speculative about all of this—I guess that's why I write novels—but it seems to me something modern and new happened after the Civil War. Of course, a number of things changed, but the era was most clearly marked by the disowning and dispossession of ex-slaves. These ex-slaves were sometimes taken into their local labor markets, but they often tried to escape their problems by migrating to the city. I was fascinated by the thought of what the city must have meant to them, these second- and third-generation ex-slaves, to rural people living there in their own number. The city must have seemed so exciting and wonderful, so much the place to be.

I was interested in how the city worked. How classes and groups and nationalities had the security of numbers within their own turfs and territories, but also felt the thrill of knowing that there were other turfs and other territories, and felt the real glamour and excitement of being in this throng. I was interested in how music changed in this country. Spirituals and gospel and blues represented one kind of response to slavery—they gave voice to the yearning for escape, in code, literally on the Underground Railroad.

I was also concerned with personal life. How did people love one another? What did they think was free? At that time, when the ex-slaves were moving into the city, running away from something that was constricting and killing them and dispossessing them over and over and over again, they were in a very limiting environment. But when you listen to their music—the beginnings of jazz—you realized that they are talking about something else. They are talking about love, about loss. But there is such grandeur, such satisfaction in those lyrics . . . they're never happy—somebody's always leaving—but they're not whining. It's as though the whole tragedy of choosing somebody, risking love, risking emotion, risking sensuality, and then losing it all didn't matter, since it was their choice. Exercising choice in who you love was a major, major thing. And the music reinforced the idea of love as a space where one could negotiate freedom.

Obviously, jazz was considered—as all new music is—to be devil music; too sensual and provocative, and so on. But for some black people jazz meant claiming their own bodies. You can imagine what that must have meant for people whose bodies had been owned, who had been slaves as children, or who remembered their parents' being slaves. Blues and jazz represented ownership of one's own emotions. So of course it is excessive and overdone: tragedy in jazz is relished, almost as though a happy ending would take away some of its glamour, its flair. Now advertisers use jazz on television to communicate authenticity and modernity; to say "trust me," and to say "hip."

These days the city still retains the quality of excitement it had in the jazz age—only now we associate that excitement with a different kind of danger. We chant and scream and act alarmed about the homeless; we say we want our streets back, but it is from our awareness of homelessness and our employment of strategies to deal with it that we get our sense of the urban. Feeling as though we have the armor, the shields, the moxie, the strength, the toughness, and the smarts to be engaged and survive encounters with the unpredictable, the alien, the strange, and the violent is an intrinsic part of what it means to live in the city. When people "complain" about homelessness they are actually bragging about it: New York has more homeless than San

Francisco. No, no, no, San Francisco has more homeless. No, you haven't been to Detroit. We are almost competitive about our endurance, which I think is one of the reasons why we accept homelessness so easily.

INTERVIEWER

So the city freed the ex-slaves from their history?

MORRISON

In part, yes. The city was seductive to them because it promised forgetfulness. It offered the possibility of freedom—freedom, as you put it, from history. But although history should not become a straitjacket, which overwhelms and binds, neither should it be forgotten. One must critique it, test it, confront it, and understand it in order to achieve a freedom that is more than license, to achieve true, adult agency. If you penetrate the seduction of the city, then it becomes possible to confront your own history—to forget what ought to be forgotten and use what is useful—such true agency is made possible.

INTERVIEWER

How do visual images influence your work?

MORRISON

I was having some difficulty describing a scene in *Song of Solomon* . . . of a man running away from some obligations and himself. I used an Edvard Munch painting almost literally. He is walking and there is nobody on his side of the street. Everybody is on the other side.

INTERVIEWER

Song of Solomon is such a painted book in comparison with some of your others like *Beloved*, which is sepia toned.

MORRISON

Part of that has to do with the visual images that I got being aware that in historical terms women, black people in general, were very attracted to very bright-colored clothing. Most people are frightened by color anyway.

INTERVIEWER

Why?

MORRISON

They just are. In this culture quiet colors are considered elegant. Civilized Western people wouldn't buy bloodred sheets or dishes. There may be something more to it than what I am suggesting. But the slave population had no access even to what color there was, because they wore slave clothes, hand-me-downs, work clothes made out of burlap and sacking. For them a colored dress would be luxurious; it wouldn't matter whether it was rich or poor cloth . . . just to have a red or a yellow dress. I stripped *Beloved* of color so that there are only the small moments when Sethe runs amok buying ribbons and bows, enjoying herself the way children enjoy that kind of color. The whole business of color was why slavery was able to last such a long time. It wasn't as though you had a class of convicts who could dress themselves up and pass themselves off. No, these were people marked because of their skin color, as well as other features. So color is a signifying mark. Baby Suggs dreams of color and says, "Bring me a little lavender." It is a

kind of luxury. We are so inundated with color and visuals. I just wanted to pull it back so that one could feel that hunger and that delight. I couldn't do that if I had made it the painterly book *Song of Solomon* was.

INTERVIEWER

Is that what you are referring to when you speak about needing to find a controlling image?

MORRISON

Sometimes, yes. There are three or four in *Song of Solomon*, I knew that I wanted it to be painterly, and I wanted the opening to be red, white, and blue. I also knew that in some sense he would have to "fly." In *Song of Solomon* it was the first time that I had written about a man who was the central, the driving engine of the narrative; I was a little unsure about my ability to feel comfortable inside him. I could always look at him and write from the outside, but those would have been just perceptions. I had to be able not only to look at him but to feel how it really must have felt. So in trying to think about this, the image in my mind was a train. All the previous books have been women centered, and they have been pretty much in the neighborhood and in the yard; this was going to move out. So, I had this feeling about a train . . . sort of revving up, then moving out as he does, and then it sort of highballs at the end; it speeds up, but it doesn't brake, it just highballs and leaves you sort of suspended. So that image controlled the structure for me, although that is not something I articulate or even make reference to; it only matters that it works for me. Other books look like spirals, like *Sula*.

INTERVIEWER

How would you describe the controlling image of *Jazz*?

MORRISON

Jazz was very complicated because I wanted to re-represent two contradictory things—artifice and improvisation—where you have an artwork, planned, thought through, but at the same time appears invented, like jazz. I thought of the image being a book. Physically a book, but at the same time it is writing itself. Imagining itself. Talking. Aware of what it is doing. It watches itself think and imagine. That seemed to me to be a combination of artifice and improvisation—where you practice and plan in order to invent. Also the willingness to fail, to be wrong, because jazz is performance. In a performance you make mistakes, and you don't have the luxury of revision that a writer has; you have to make something out of a mistake, and if you do it well enough it will take you to another place where you never would have gone had you not made that error. So, you have to be able to risk making that error in performance. Dancers do it all the time, as well as jazz musicians. *Jazz* predicts its own story. Sometimes it is wrong because of faulty vision. It simply did not imagine those characters well enough, admits it was wrong, and the characters talk back the way jazz musicians do. It has to listen to the characters it has invented and then learn something from them. It was the most intricate thing I had done, though I wanted to tell a very simple story about people who do not know that they are living in the jazz age and to never use the word.

INTERVIEWER

One way to achieve this structurally is to have several voices speaking throughout each book. Why do you do this?

MORRISON

It's important not to have a totalizing view. In American literature we have been so totalized—as though there is only one version. We are not one indistinguishable block of people who always behave the same way.

INTERVIEWER

Is that what you mean by *totalized*?

MORRISON

Yes. A definitive or an authoritarian view from somebody else or someone speaking for us. No singularity and no diversity. I try to give some credibility to all sorts of voices, each of which is profoundly different. Because what strikes me about African American culture *is* its variety. In so much of contemporary music everybody sounds alike. But when you think about black music, you think about the difference between Duke Ellington and Sidney Bechet or Satchmo or Miles Davis. They don't sound anything alike, but you know that they are all black performers, because of whatever that quality is that makes you realize, Oh yes, this is part of something called the African American music tradition. There is no black woman popular singer, jazz singer, blues singer who sounds like any other. Billie Holiday does not sound like Aretha, doesn't sound like Nina, doesn't sound like Sarah, doesn't sound like any of them. They are really powerfully different. And they will tell you that they couldn't possibly have made it as singers if they sounded like somebody else. If someone comes along sounding like Ella Fitzgerald, they will say, Oh we have one of those . . . It's interesting to me how those women have this very distinct, unmistakable image. I would like to write like that. I would like to write novels that were unmistakably mine, but nevertheless fit first into African American traditions and second of all, this whole thing called literature.

INTERVIEWER

First African American?

MORRISON

Yes.

INTERVIEWER

. . . rather than the whole of literature?

MORRISON

Oh yes.

INTERVIEWER

Why?

MORRISON

It's richer. It has more complex sources. It pulls from something that's closer to the edge, it's much more modern. It has a human future.

INTERVIEWER

Wouldn't you rather be known as a great exponent of literature rather than as an African American writer?

MORRISON

It's very important to me that my work be African American; if it assimilates into a different or larger pool, so much the better. But I shouldn't be *asked* to do that. Joyce is not asked to do that. Tolstoy is not. I mean, they can all be Russian, French, Irish or Catholic, they write out of where they come from, and I do too. It just so happens that that space for me is African American; it could be Catholic, it could be Midwestern. I'm those things too, and they are all important.

INTERVIEWER

Why do you think people ask, Why don't you write something that we can understand? Do you threaten them by not writing in the typical Western, linear, chronological way?

MORRISON

I don't think that they mean that. I think they mean, Are you ever going to write a book about white people? For them perhaps that's a kind of a compliment. They're saying, You write well enough, I would even let you write about me. They couldn't say that to anybody else. I mean, could I have gone up to André Gide and said, Yes, but when are you going to get serious and start writing about black people? I don't think he would know how to answer that question. Just as I don't. He would say, What? I will if I want to, or, Who are you? What is behind that question is, there's the center, which is white, and then there are these regional blacks or Asians, or any sort of marginal people. That question can only be asked from the center. Bill Moyers asked me that when-are-you-going-to-write-about question on television. I just said, Well, maybe one day . . . but I couldn't say to him, you know, you can only ask that question from the center. The center of the world! I mean he's a white male. He's asking a marginal person when are you going to get to the center, when are you going to write about white people. I can't say, Bill, why are you asking me that question? Or, As long as that question seems reasonable is as long as I won't, can't. The point is that he's patronizing; he's saying, You write well enough; you could come on into the center if you wanted to. You don't have to stay out there on the margins. And I'm saying, Yeah, well, I'm gonna stay out here on the margin, and let the center look for me.

Maybe it's a false claim, but not fully. I'm sure it was true for the ones we think of as giants now. Joyce is a good example. He moved here and there, but he wrote about Ireland wherever he was, didn't care where he was. I am sure people said to him, Why . . .? Maybe the French asked, When you gonna write about Paris?

INTERVIEWER

What do you appreciate most in Joyce?

MORRISON

It is amazing how certain kinds of irony and humor travel. Sometimes Joyce is hilarious. I read *Finnegans Wake* after graduate school and I had the great good fortune of reading it without any help. I don't know if I read it right, but it was hilarious! I laughed constantly! I didn't know what was going on for whole blocks but it didn't matter because I wasn't going to be graded on it. I think the reason why everyone still has so much fun with Shakespeare is because he didn't have any literary critic. He was just doing it; and there were no reviews except for people throwing stuff on stage. He could just do it.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think if he had been reviewed he would have worked less?

MORRISON

Oh, if he'd cared about it, he'd have been very self-conscious. That's a hard attitude to maintain, to pretend you don't care, pretend you don't read.

INTERVIEWER

Do you read your reviews?

MORRISON

I read everything.

INTERVIEWER

Really? You look deadly serious.

MORRISON

I read everything written about me that I see.

INTERVIEWER

Why is that?

MORRISON

I have to know what's going on!

INTERVIEWER

You want to see how you're coming across?

MORRISON

No, no. It's not about me or my work, it's about what is going on. I have to get a sense, particularly of what's going on with women's work or African American work, contemporary work. I teach a literature course. So I read any information that's going to help me teach.

INTERVIEWER

Are you ever really surprised when they compare you to the magic realists, such as Gabriel García Márquez?

MORRISON

Yes, I used to be. It doesn't mean anything to me. Schools are only important to me when I'm teaching literature. It doesn't mean anything to me when I'm sitting here with a big pile of blank yellow paper . . . what do I say? I'm a magic realist? Each subject matter demands its own form, you know.

INTERVIEWER

Why do you teach undergraduates?

MORRISON

Here at Princeton, they really do value undergraduates, which is nice because a lot of universities value only the graduate school or the professional research schools. I like Princeton's notion. I

would have loved that for my own children. I don't like freshman and sophomores being treated as the staging ground or the playground or the canvas on which graduate students learn how to teach. They need the best instruction. I've always thought the public schools needed to study the best literature. I always taught *Oedipus Rex* to all kinds of what they used to call remedial or development classes. The reason those kids are in those classes is that they're bored to death; so you can't give them boring things. You have to give them the best there is to engage them.

INTERVIEWER

One of your sons is a musician. Were you ever musical, did you ever play the piano?

MORRISON

No, but I come from a family of highly skilled musicians. Highly skilled, meaning most of them couldn't read music but they could play everything that they heard . . . instantly. They sent us, my sister and me, to music lessons. They were sending me off to learn how to do something that they could do naturally. I thought I was deficient, retarded. They didn't explain that perhaps it's more important that you learn how to *read* music . . . that it's a good thing, not a bad thing. I thought we were sort of lame people going off to learn how to walk, while, you know, they all just stood up and did it naturally.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think there is an education for becoming a writer? Reading perhaps?

MORRISON

That has only limited value.

INTERVIEWER

Travel the world? Take courses in sociology, history?

MORRISON

Or stay home . . . I don't think they have to go anywhere.

INTERVIEWER

Some people say, Oh, I can't write a book until I've lived my life, until I've had experiences.

MORRISON

That may be—maybe they can't. But look at the people who never went anywhere and just thought it up. Thomas Mann. I guess he took a few little trips . . . I think you either have or you acquire this sort of imagination. Sometimes you do need a stimulus. But I myself don't ever go anywhere for stimulation. I don't want to go anywhere. If I could just sit in one spot I would be happy. I don't trust the ones who say I have to go do something before I can write. You see, I don't write autobiographically. First of all, I'm not interested in real-life people as subjects for fiction—including myself. If I write about somebody who's a historical figure like Margaret Garner, I really don't know anything about her. What I knew came from reading two interviews with her. They said, Isn't this extraordinary. Here's a woman who escaped into Cincinnati from the horrors of slavery and was not crazy. Though she'd killed her child, she was not foaming at the mouth. She was very calm; she said, I'd do it again. That was more than enough to fire my imagination.

INTERVIEWER

She was sort of a cause célèbre?

MORRISON

She was. Her real life was much more awful than it's rendered in the novel, but if I had known all there was to know about her I never would have written it. It would have been finished; there would have been no place in there for me. It would be like a recipe already cooked. There you are. You're already this person. Why should I get to steal from you? I don't like that. What I really love is the process of invention. To have characters move from the curl all the way to a full-fledged person, that's interesting.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever write out of anger or any other emotion?

MORRISON

No. Anger is a very intense but tiny emotion, you know. It doesn't last. It doesn't produce anything. It's not creative . . . at least not for me. I mean these books take at least three years!

INTERVIEWER

That is a long time to be angry.

MORRISON

Yes. I don't trust that stuff anyway. I don't like those little quick emotions, like, I'm lonely, *ohhh*, God . . . I don't like those emotions as fuel. I mean, I have them, but—

INTERVIEWER

—they're not a good muse?

MORRISON

No, and if it's not your brain thinking cold, cold thoughts, which you can dress in any kind of mood, then it's nothing. It has to be a cold, cold thought. I mean cold, or cool at least. Your brain. That's all there is.